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U.S. Studies Shift in Stand at Strategic Arms Talks

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WASHINGTON, April 29 — An inter-agency working group is considering revisions of the Administration's strategic arms proposal that could narrow differences with the Soviet position and lead to the development of a new single-warhead missile, Administration officials said today.

The United States originally proposed restricting each side to 850 intercontinental missiles on land and sea. Two officials said the working group was considering raising or abandoning the limit.

A White House official said the discussions so far had been strictly at the working level of the State Department, Pentagon, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council staff.

The Administration is being pressed to change its position by Congressional Democrats who have made their support of the President's proposal to deploy 100 MX missiles contingent on a shift in the American position away from multiwarhead missiles to single-warhead missiles.

The Soviet Position

That major change in direction was recommended by the President's Commission on Strategic Forces, whose report was adopted by President Reagan this month. Independently, some Administration arms specialists saw an opportunity to bridge differences with the Soviet Union when strategic arms negotiations resume in Geneva on June 8 after a recess.

Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet Communist Party leader, has said that Moscow favors a reduction of 25 percent in mis-

sile launchers. That would mean reducing the current Soviet total from 2,400 missiles on land and in submarines to 1,800 while permitting the United States to keep its present total of 1,700 missiles.

Soviet arms negotiators are understood to have objected vigorously to the Reagan Administration's proposal to lower this limit to 850 deployed missiles for each side because this would force a far more drastic restructuring of the Soviet nuclear arsenal than of the American arsenal.

Consequently, some American officials believe a higher American limit would appeal to the Kremlin. But they are uncertain how Moscow would react if the United States proposed abandoning all limits on deployed missiles or setting a very high number. The idea is not only for this country to move toward single-warhead missiles but to persuade Moscow to follow suit on the ground that both countries would be more secure with more such missiles than they are now with so many warheads concentrated on relatively few missiles.

There is a consensus in the Administration that the gravest threat is posed not by the number of missiles but the number of warheads they carry. As Moscow has put 4, 6 and 10 warheads on a single missile, American planners have seen the threat to American land-based missiles grow.

A New Missile

Consequently, the President's commission, pro-arms control members of Congress and many Administration officials have become convinced that the wisest course is to develop a new single-warhead missile and deploy many of them. That would not be possible under the Administration's current arms proposal. Hence the need for revisions.

Defense Department officials are reportedly reluctant to change the American negotiating posture soon because they want more time for research and development of the smaller and more accurate single-warhead missile that could be deployed in a way that would foil or withstand Soviet attack. The missile is still only a concept on paper, according to Congressional testimony by Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger.

Officials say the Administration is still intent upon its proposals to reduce the number of nuclear warheads on land- and sea-based missiles to 5,000 from 7,500 and to reduce the total throw weight, or payload, of each side to a figure below the current American level. At present, the United States estimates the total Soviet throw weight at over 12 million pounds to 3.9 million pounds for the United States. Early indications are that most officials favor staying with the current warhead and throw weight positions.